

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Yarram — 24 May 2006

Members

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Witnesses

Mr E R Dennis, Community Strengthening Coordinator, South Gippsland Shire Council (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome Ned, thank you for joining us today. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation, and I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee including submissions is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent member. We are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Could you please give us your full name and address and the name of the organization you represent today, position within that organization and take the oath or affirmation.

Mr DENNIS — Edward Richard Dennis, known as Ned, I work with South Gippsland Shire council, the position I have is Community Strengthening Coordinator.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much if you would like to give us your presentation and then we will move on to some questions.

Mr DENNIS — Just briefly about myself, as I said I work as the South Gippsland Shire Council's Community Strengthening Coordinator. The role includes youth development, community building and arts and cultural developments so it is a deliberate bringing together of what works through separate streams into one area for we think logical reasons. I have worked for 25 years around youth development, sometimes way back specifically as youth worker, more commonly in the adult ed sector and now with local government working with young people who are 15 to 19 who struggle with conventional schooling looking at different ways for them to be engaged with learning or engaged with their communities or less socially dislocated.

I am one of those people who grew up in the western district, after finishing year 12 I went to Melbourne to attempt to study but more to work for a few years. When I was about 23 shifted to another part of the country in South Gippsland and have raised three kids in that rural area, so I am one of the people who has been encouraged to come back and in that I brought a person from the City with me as a partner so in that sense I think we made a net gain. I have two kids who have actually left and gone away to Melbourne for specialist study work and one who is 19 who has stayed in the district. I think we will lose him for a while, our hope is we get him back to the country somewhere down the track.

The significant population figures for this discussion, often people are not aware that under 17 are actually above the state average, so the kids are there and they are being born and growing up in the district and obviously the big stuff is 18 to 34, Victoria 16% of our population, 39% to 49% 15, 16 years is the critical reasons. I will not talk much about education because other people who have an expertise in that area have, but the observations from local government point of view that we make. We are well served by our secondary colleges in South Gippsland they are quality institutions, but that is not recognised locally. It is not recognised by parents and kids often, and often it is not recognised by employers. So that is undervalued and that is something that you people may be able to take away with you and do some work on.

Access to tertiary studies is obviously the major reason for young people leaving and it will come up all the time. What it means is that I think we have a role to play and an advocacy role for local government for instance to encourage tertiary institutions to look at smarter ways of delivering services outside the major metropolitan campuses, smarter ways to use modern information technology to other population centres and find ways to get people together using that within the those population centres. Some universities have a good track record into rural Victoria and rural Australia and some of them is not so good. You will have other people who talk more about that.

The support for education and training that supports local employment is important and obviously there is a big role for TAFE there and support for the TAFE Institutions is very critical to our sort of area where they have a chance to develop those skill areas and the support for education around dairy, horticulture, it has been a hot political issue with the way that is changing. In terms of employment you have other people who are specialist on that but our observation because we are involved in social planning to a degree and certainly encouraging economic development, skill shortages that exist in our district are very important and very obvious to us at local government because we have businesses coming to say we are interested in locating here. Would you work with us on that? It is not going to go away as things stand and that is a critical issue to be worked on.

We think more community education, and that means for young people learning, employers learning, particularly parents learning about the transferable skills that exist in rural areas, need to be worked on. I get very direct advice from the quite large number of trainees and young people working at the shire about how transferable skills but it is not understood and it is not understood with some of the skills develop working say on farms that are transferable to all sorts of other businesses that might be elsewhere. If you are working on building roads, you transfer those skills to be able to build tennis courts. There is a whole lot of stuff that we are missing the opportunity in the education sense to promote that transferability of skills to young people.

One of the things that I did a bit of research anecdotally around our track before coming, the younger staff talk about the gap between the wage levels that they perceive between metropolitan and country Victoria. I do not have the exact figures to see if that is true, but that is the strong perception of young people and the strong encouragement to say we will go and there is 30% more as an IT worker, or as youth worker or working in the health system or in business and sometimes we know it is a mirage but that is a very strong perception.

Transport will come up all the time before you and it comes up every time we do a survey or we ask the young people in our district to say what are the key issues and one of the top three along with having their entertainment, and training opportunities, and the transport issue we know it is massive. Obviously for under 18's it is significant because it does reduce how they can get to the training opportunities and it certainly reduces what job opportunities they might be able to take up if they might not be in the town or if they are living on a farm or a five acre block. We have a lot of people in our district young people's whose parents on a small acreage still work in the metropolitan area or the Valley who are very isolated, they are cared for, but they are isolated on their five acre blocks because they still do not have the transport to get to part time jobs. I had two children like that living out in the bush, very hard for them to get a part-time job because they just could not get there unless mum and dad happened to be working in that town and that is a significant issue still.

Community engagement is one of the real bonuses that we build on. Young people react positively to being able to be involved in community life. The people who I interviewed the young people have stayed in our district, and what is the thing, one of the key factors that all have said to me is the chance to engage in the broader community activity. A really good example I was given by one young fellow who is now 22, at 19 he was a president of the local basketball association. So in that respect he said none of his mates in Melbourne could possibly have been given that opportunity. At the community level they also commented that they say that is very significant and they also see their friends in Melbourne actually more socially isolated than they are once they got integrated where you might get access to transport.

Certainly in the social engagement side of things the small population numbers in rural areas limit social engagement and that is a comment that the young people talk to us about regularly. The point I want to make out of that is that government sponsored youth projects need to recognise and it might sound very straight forward and obvious but it is something that we still need to mention, that our per capita rate for young people being involved in our district might be very high, but gross numbers still often fall outside the professional job of government programs saying you have got to have a certain number of people. You need 200 people turning up to qualify, now 200 might be a massive proportion of the youth population, but they are things we want to highlight to you. That issue about proportionality is something that is important in looking at how government programs involve our access.

It was interesting I was hearing your discussions just before about this issue I think about the positive profile group in the community. Consistently the young people I work with and talk to say they are under a lot of pressure to leave home, that they will feel like a failure if they do not leave the district and go away to try something else. I know lots of us as parents are actually guilty of that, we think if we have not raised our children so they feel comfortable to go away to the big smoke if they want to, they feel let down somehow. It is a significant issue that is there told by young people and I know this from all my own friends who mostly have got young kids. The peer pressure to prove that you can is important so therefore, when we are planning that we have to think that is going to happen anyway and people might just want to go. I left as soon as I could as soon as year 12 was over I left just because you did that.

Finding the way to encourage people to come back is of even greater significance and one of the things that we try to do is to find the way that youngsters who might have turned 19 or 20 who have been involved in our networks and gone away for study to find the ways for them to come back and stay engaged with their community on weekends, other than what happens particularly in football, some are in cricket, not very much with netball I

understand. For people come back to be involved, we are looking to find ways to do that if you like on the community side of things. But many say a more positive profile for the importance of the rural contribution to Victoria they think would help with coping with that and we know how absolutely significant to the Victorian economy the dairy is for instance, even in the country most people do not realise that is 30% of our exports, they just do not understand that. When they hear it you actually see the shoulders go up and yes, that is very significant and we know that will become more significant.

The way we tackle this from our role at the South Gippsland Shire Council is to focus our work on that community engagement finding the ways for young people to be actively engaged in their community. So the youth council in our area is very vibrant but it is focused around not just saying this what should happen but let us do things, let us be engaged and the council for a number of years and in the long term planning is supportive financially and with workers for young people who have developed their leadership skills and their engagement skills. We collaborate with the other agencies and the schools, but we see that our patch is that community engagement level for youth services for instance we supported them (the youth council) for getting a major youth grant that. One of the very strong comments that we consistently get from the young people is with all the budget in the world there will not be enough money made available to put a youth worker in every town on every Saturday night. Help us learn more so that we can look after our peers so that we can start breaking down that disrespect by an older generation for a younger generation. That is the focus of our work, but on the ground as a council, we also have a lot of trainees so I think we actually throw good funding into the youth engagement area, giving someone like me the sort of role that I have got and we actually think that trying to provide a good corporate example, if you like, of being involved.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much Ned.

Mr McQUILTEN — What happens when council's change, when council laws change? Have you found any problem with a direction or if there is a change of council?

Mr DENNIS — Undoubtedly it is a political world we live and we have to be aware of that. We as workers supporting this direction have to be able to put what we are doing into a context that is meaningful to councils and the rural community. The reason why in our area the youth services in regard to culture and the community development work is rolled together partly by circumstances three years ago when our council was financially having a struggle and it shed a lot of workers, four positions that were rolled into one. There was a deliberate review of how to do that, now we actually have some more workers in that team now, but the plan would be not to go back to those isolated streams but to actually have that range of community engagement work in one team, with specialty areas in one team. We currently have very strong support from all our councillors for this approach. When I came in to work with the local government two and a half years ago, I think they were on the verge of saying, that the only way you should spend your money in youth development is in crisis intervention, why would we do that, let us give it to another agency.

So it can change with a different political dynamic. It is not likely to change for a while in South Gippsland because they are seeing so many young people actively involved in the community. So that leadership network that I talk about you have probably got about 100 young people on that, including the ones that have gone away and quite a lot of them come back. But for this process to work, we actually have to be absolutely genuine about encouraging young people and older adults to collaborate and find those ways and as much as we can act as a catalyst in a way in it's own right. If those engagements between young people and the community are still reliant on us a few years down the track then we actually have not been doing our job properly and we are all critically vulnerable to that approach.

The CHAIR — In your role the youth worker component, are you able to do any ground work with young people, one to one support and that sort of thing or do you find that you have to really work with the organizations are in the area?

Mr DENNIS — I work directly with young people but they tend to be in groups, there is not time. It is more of a mentoring role. A useful example, we currently have a FReeZA program, but we spent a couple of years working with young people to redevelop the music scene for young people so they would get an opportunity to play live and get paid, employed. Young people would come and play at their gigs that was our bent and the economic development side to it, there is a learning side. So I work with a lot of young people individually but in a mentoring role and it tends to be in small teams and that is decreasing a little bit more in that I am handing it on.

The CHAIR — Getting harder to delegate.

Mr DENNIS — To delegate and we are getting an opportunity to delegate as we get some more resources back into that field. This model where councillors can see that that makes good sense in that school, an investment of those dollars, we can delegate more. I do not necessarily want to let go of that role because it's fascinating.

The CHAIR — In regard to the FReeZA gigs how many are you able to offer per year and do you have a system of trying to spread it around different towns and transporting these young people to the events and making sure that the whole Shire can be involved?

Mr DENNIS — We have got a small contract, the contract says we have to do two gigs. We actually do five probably. Yes, we spread them all around the district, yes we involve young people from across South Gippsland having a turn we are very, very serious I guess about how we treat the FReeZA program, and before we had FReeZA we were doing that very thing, running gigs last year with around about, we supported young people who ran probably six or seven events. They were as far away as Poowong at one end and in the old Bonlac factory down at Toora and at Leongatha and all over the place, so yes we spread that around. The direction I have from council, or management from council is that if we are running the event, being the workers, then we should not be doing it.

Our whole purpose in that area is to support mentor young people to run the whole thing and they do which is fantastic. It also encourages councillors to keep supporting because they go to things and they will not see me except in the shadows in the back as an assistant or if there is a real issue. The people they see genuinely running the stage and working with the bands and all of the security is the young people who we are doing our best to skill. It is a very appropriate way we think of broadening youth engagement and developing a greater respect for young people in the community. It also crosses a whole lot of socio-economic barriers amongst the young people. We have a big festival that we have at Mossvale Park once a year and there are probably 35 young people in the lead up and on the day and running that event and they range from 15 to their mid-twenties but they also range from a wide background in terms of what they can offer.

The CHAIR — Are the young people in the communities supporting the event and these events that are happening is there capacity, if there are funds of course, to extend the amount of FReeZA events, as they are fantastic. I wonder whether sometimes is there enough of them, you know what I mean to actually really engage young people in a social situation.

Mr DENNIS — I guess I have been involved in my previous work almost from when FReeZA started, back then when we had a contract saying we had to do eight gigs a year, it was too many. The market could not bear eight of those type of activities within those constraints. We did not want – the council has not had a contract for a while, we applied for one this year and got one. We actually did not want to have too many of those events because to build the market and build the opportunity for a lot of youngsters to get to chance live and develop their skills we need to be able to run small things in small venues. We need them to learn the skills so they can set up in the corner of the park and play to 25 people or 50 people, that is where their real work will be in that area, or the kids who are not the musicians but the event managers who we are very keen to support. There are people like me who could not play an instrument in their life but good at organizing things. They learn a lot of skills in that sort of environment, so there are limitations with something like FReeZA and I think it has been a very, very good program since it's inception. But there are things that we look to do and currently we rely on the ratepayer money and some money we have got from the foundation to be able to do that small stuff in a small venue that will be for a couple of hours. That is I guess our focus, what we really want to see and that is happening we are pleased to say. We want the local footy clubs to think okay we can employ that young band who was at one of the Shire's gigs they are really good, or the young person who might be a solo act and we have seen that happen and that is the way to actually encourage and want to develop something that can stand up in the numbers.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much Ned for your time today and you will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time you may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew